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Jones, Sara

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# TOUCHING ON TABOOS: ELFRIEDE BRÜNING AND THE RECEPTION OF *PARTNERINNEN* IN THE GDR

SARA JONES

This article analyses the reception and publication of Elfriede Brüning's collection of fictional portraits, *Partnerinnen* (1978), in the context of official and critical discourse regarding female emancipation in the GDR. I examine the extent to which this writer, loyal to the SED, contributes to criticism of GDR gender politics and how publishers, reviewers and readers react to her portrayal. Through analysis of unpublished correspondence, I consider if political questions played a role in the publication process. I explore the reception of the text via analysis of newspaper reviews and of letters written by Brüning's readers. Reviews by leading literary critics point towards an attempt to steer the reading of the text; however, articles in other publications and the reaction of Brüning's readers indicate that this attempt to manipulate reception was not successful. The fragmentation of opinion regarding the work points towards the difficulty of identifying the parameters of permissible debate in the GDR. This was not simply a question of knowing Party directives on a particular issue, but was linked to the positioning of prominent individuals in relation to official rhetoric. This, in turn, points towards the role played by East German authors in the dissolution of binary values and the fragmentation of ideology in the last decades of the GDR's existence.

Dieser Artikel analysiert die Rezeption und Veröffentlichung der Porträtsammlung *Partnerinnen* (1978) von Elfriede Brüning im Kontext des offiziellen und kritischen Diskurses zur Emanzipation der Frau in der DDR. Dabei wird das Ausmaß, in dem die parteitreue Schriftstellerin zur Kritik an der Geschlechterpolitik der DDR beigetragen hat, und die Art der Reaktionen von Verlagen, Rezensenten und Lesern auf ihre Porträtierungen untersucht. Durch eine Analyse unveröffentlichter Korrespondenz wird die Frage nach dem politischen Einfluss auf den Publikationsprozess erörtert. Die Rezeption des Textes wird anhand einer Analyse von Zeitungsrezensionen und Leserbriefen erforscht. Rezensionen von führenden Literaturkritikern deuten auf einen Versuch, das Lesen des Textes zu steuern, hin. Andere Veröffentlichungen und Reaktionen von Brünings Lesern darauf zeigen dagegen, dass dieser Versuch, die Rezeption zu manipulieren, nicht erfolgreich war. Die Unterschiede der Auffassungen über das Werk weisen auf die Schwierigkeiten hin, Parameter einer zulässigen Debatte in der DDR festzustellen. Dabei ging es nicht nur um die Kenntnis der Parteiweisungen in einer bestimmten Angelegenheit, sondern auch um die Positionierung prominenter Persönlichkeiten im Hinblick auf die offizielle Rhetorik. Dies wiederum deutet auf die Rolle hin, die ostdeutsche Schriftsteller bei der Auflösung eines Schwarz-Weiß-Denkschemas und bei dem Ideologieverfall in den letzten Jahrzehnten der DDR spielten.

On the surface, Elfriede Brüning's relationship with representatives of power in the GDR was harmonious. She had been a member of the KPD and the Bund proletarisch-

revolutionärer Schriftsteller in the 1930s and was a long-standing member of the SED and the Writers' Union. She supported the regime's expatriation of Wolf Biermann in 1976 and publicly expressed no concern over the expulsion of nine writers from the Writers' Union in 1979. Her works were all published in the GDR and she was not involved in any international controversies regarding the censorship of texts or their publication in the West. Writing in 1983, Dorothy Rosenberg described Brüning as 'a loyal Party hack writer'.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, in her post-Wende autobiography, *Und außerdem war es mein Leben* (1994), Brüning suggests that this apparently harmonious relationship was not all it seemed. She recalls the scathing criticisms of her works in GDR literary journals, particularly with respect to *Vor uns das Leben* (1952), *Regine Haberkorn* (1955) and *Septemberreise* (1974)<sup>2</sup> and suggests that those in power considered that she had not broached politically sensitive issues from the correct perspective.<sup>3</sup> In her analysis of Brüning's autobiography, Joanne Sayner argues that these exchanges with reviewers allow 'a retrospective defence of her writing' and that 'within a dominant post-Wende framework of criticism of East German authors' support of the state, these negative reviews function as positive indications of past distance to official discourse.'<sup>4</sup>

There were certainly some highly critical appraisals of Brüning's work in the GDR press of the 1960s, notably the debate surrounding 'Septemberreise' in *Neue Deutsche Literatur* in 1967, in which the literary critic Hans-Jürgen Geerdts described this short story as having been written from a petty-bourgeois perspective and as lacking 'ästhetisch wirkende Parteilichkeit'.<sup>5</sup> As Wolfgang Emmerich argues, such negative reviews in this Party organ might act as a form of 'Nachzensur' – discouraging readers from purchasing the work and encouraging a particular interpretation of the text.<sup>6</sup> This reception of her work thus leads to the question of

whether Brüning's literary texts were at odds with the cultural policies of the SED. If one takes the view that 'post-censorship' was used to combat whatever the Party deemed to fall outside its narrow understanding of socialist literature, then such negative reviews would seem to indicate that her works were considered ideologically problematic. However, I will argue that this understanding of the role of literary criticism cannot encompass the complexities of literary production in the socialist state and of the relationship between official ideology and the reception of literary texts. In this essay, I demonstrate this approach through analysis of the production and reception of Brüning's 1978 publication, *Partnerinnen*, in the context of official and critical discourse regarding the emancipation of women in the GDR.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Partnerinnen* and Gender Politics in the GDR**

The publication of *Partnerinnen* in the late 1970s places it in the context of a very specific set of gender politics in the GDR. Official statements by leading Party members claimed that female emancipation had been fully realised with new employment opportunities and the provision of adequate childcare. Policy relating to women was reduced in the 1970s to material measures aimed at supporting working mothers: traditional gender roles and the problem of the 'double burden' were not called into question.<sup>8</sup> Emancipation in the GDR was, as Dinah Dodds argues, 'only superficial, a *Scheinemanzipation*', although it was not necessarily perceived as such by East German women.<sup>9</sup> However, as will be seen, this was also a period in which many prominent female writers were addressing such questions as female sexuality, patriarchal structures and the possibility of combining work and family life. The formation of the first women's groups outside the official public sphere at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, whose discussions centred on issues of peace,

the environment, emancipation and homosexuality, indicates that such critique fed into broader social developments.<sup>10</sup>

One of Brüning's key concerns in her post-1945 writing was the position of women in the new socialist society and the effects of economic and legal emancipation. Her 1955 novel, *Regine Haberkorn*, which focuses on the experience of a woman taking up paid employment in a factory for the first time, is frequently cited as an example of women's literature of the early years, which conformed to official policy on female emancipation and was written with the aim of encouraging women to join the workforce.<sup>11</sup> Published 23 years later, *Partnerinnen*, in contrast, is a collection of four short fictional portraits of women in the GDR, with each woman having taken a different approach to juggling the demands of career, children and marriage and with each experiencing different problems along the way – be it the need to sacrifice a career to care for children, the break-down of marriage due to a focus on career or a lack of personal fulfilment through a focus on children. Archive material and media reviews indicate that the text was well received in the GDR: Brüning was recommended for the FDGB Kunstpreis for *Partnerinnen* in over ninety letters from collectives in various companies and factories between 1978 and 1980.<sup>12</sup> Despite such popular support, she did not actually receive the prize until 1983.

In 1982, Ruth Eberlein, who was researching a thesis on Brüning, informed her of the workers' support for the text. In a letter to Eberhard Günther, head of the Mitteldeutscher Verlag, dated 19 March 1982, Brüning comments: 'Na, gekriegt habe ich ihn nicht. Warum macht man eigentlich diese öffentlichen Diskussionen, wenn man sich nicht danach richtet?' However, Brüning offers no answer to this question herself, asking instead if Günther would consider a new edition of *Partnerinnen* in the same year rather than the next.<sup>13</sup> In this instance, she uses the popular support for her

works as a tool for negotiating with her publisher, but does not openly paint the failure to follow the wishes of the public in a political light. In her autobiography, *Und außerdem war es mein Leben*, Brüning does give an answer to the question of why the FDGB did not follow the suggestions of the companies and factories. She draws a direct link between the criticism of *Regine Haberkorn*, which faced similar attacks to *Septemberreise*, and her long wait for literary recognition.<sup>14</sup> She thus sets the decision not to award her the prize in the context of a conflict with official expectations of socialist literature, but not explicitly with regard to the gender politics of the time.

However, in an interview in 2006, Brüning suggests yet another version of events, indicating that the failure to award her the Kunstpreis was a result of an objection to her presentation of the emancipation of women in the GDR:

Ja, den Oberen passte es nicht, dass ich die Emanzipation der Frau kritisch gesehen habe. Ich fand es wunderbar, die Emanzipation der Frau, aber man darf sie nicht übertreiben. Sie darf nicht auf Kosten anderer gehen und sie geht doch oft auf Kosten der Kinder, die sich allein überlassen waren.<sup>15</sup>

As discussed above, the image of the employed mother remained dominant in official discourse to the end of the GDR. Women were expected to be able to master the demands of both areas of their lives without commitments in one part impinging on commitments in the other. Eva Kaufmann argues that official policies ‘saw women’s emancipation as already realised and considered critical discussion of it to be harmful’.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, at the Eighth Party Congress in 1971, after Erich Honecker’s accession to power, the equality of women was declared to be largely achieved both legally and in everyday life.<sup>17</sup> Brüning’s questioning of the possibility of achieving gender equality even under a state system that provided adequate childcare may

therefore indeed have come into conflict with official policy. However, as I will argue, analysis of the publication and reception of Brüning's text reveals a more complex interaction between official and critical discourse on this issue and not outright disapproval by publishers and reviewers of any deviation from the Party line.

### **The Publication Process**

Turning first to the archive material relating to the publication process of *Partnerinnen*, a letter from Steffi Hoffmeister of the magazine *Für Dich*,<sup>18</sup> dated 29 July 1975, suggests that Brüning's presentation of female emancipation may indeed have met with ideological objection. Hoffmeister writes to Brüning to reject the publication of an unnamed story by Brüning in the magazine. Hoffmeister's comments on the portrayal of women of various generations in the story indicate that this is one of the portraits in *Partnerinnen*, or has much in common with the stories in the collection.<sup>19</sup> Hoffmeister insists that they are not rejecting the story because it is critical, stating that they believe that art has the function 'wachzurütteln'.<sup>20</sup> However, her comments on the story suggest that it is Brüning's approach to the question of the emancipation of women under socialism that has been found wanting. Hoffmeister criticises Brüning's portrayal of the older generation of women as 'die "Gelackmeierten der neuen Gesellschaft"', of the middle generation as evil careerists and of younger women as ambitious, cold and selfish. She states that through the narrative it is clear that Brüning stands on the side of the protagonist, the member of the older generation: 'dadurch resignieren Sie mit ihr, verurteilen und etikettieren [sic] Sie mit ihr zusammen *die* junge Generation schlechthin'.<sup>21</sup> Hoffmeister's accusations of pessimism and her criticism of the women in Brüning's story who are either resigned to their fate or are cold and ambitious, that is, who question the possibility of managing both career and family, are evidence of a very narrowly

drawn approach to literature that determines what gets into *Für Dich* at this time. As Martha Wörsching notes, the image of a woman successfully combining career, motherhood and marriage remained dominant in this women's weekly right up to the Wende.<sup>22</sup>

However, in respect of the publication in book form, there appear to have been fewer objections to the text on the part of Mitteldeutscher Verlag. A letter from Brüning's reader in the publishing house, Ursula Steinhaußen, dated 31 March 1976, outlines the changes Brüning is asked to make to the fourth story in the collection, 'Rita', which focuses on a woman who chose to abandon her career in favour of life as mother and wife. These changes are not, however, related to the content, but to stylistic issues: Steinhaußen criticises Brüning's use of colloquial language and repetition of particular words and phrases. She indicates that this is already a reworked version of the story and that Brüning has added sections that deepen the 'innere Auseinandersetzung Ritas'. This might point towards earlier criticism of the portrayal of a woman who has chosen caring for her children above a career. However, such an objection could not have been the cause of disapproval of the published work, nor of the failure of the FDGB to grant Brüning the Kunstpreis, as Brüning has evidently already removed any problematic passages.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, a letter from Steinhaußen to Brüning, dated 5 April 1976, contains comments on the first story in the collection, 'Johanna', which, in Steinhaußen's own words are 'meist sprachlicher Art'. She praises Brüning for having made the figure of Johanna – a member of the older generation and Rita's mother, who felt compelled to curb her commitments to her career and to the building of socialism in order to look after her children – less polemical, more likeable and more just. This again could be read as indicative of earlier criticism of Brüning's text in political terms, and is similar to the



comments made by Hoffmeister. However, Brüning has evidently now changed those aspects that were previously considered problematic and they, therefore, did not appear in the final publication.<sup>24</sup>

## **Reception**

In view of the ‘post-censorship’ of Brüning’s earlier works, it is also important to consider the public reception of Brüning’s text, when looking for indications of official disapproval of her portrayal of emancipation in the GDR. In a review in the *Berliner Zeitung* on 8 March 1978, the literary critic, Werner Neubert, notes that Brüning is a popular author and ascribes this popularity to her ‘Nähe zum Leben, zu seinen sozialen, pädagogischen und auch psychologischen Fragen’. Neubert considers that Brüning’s works are not only of interest to women, but to the whole of socialist society and that *Partnerinnen* can be considered a study of the quest for happiness in the GDR. He describes the stories as presenting a ‘lebensbejahendes, mutiges Bild’.<sup>25</sup> What is striking about this praise of *Partnerinnen*, is, however, the lack of attention given to the central concern of the collection, that is, the possibility of gender equality in a society which, despite steps towards the economic emancipation of women, still holds onto the view of women as the primary care-givers. He describes the story ‘Renate’, the only one in the collection in which a woman is seen to achieve a balance between career and family, but not without sacrifice, as ‘ein Porträt fraulichen Anspruchs auf das Leben’. Neubert thus indicates a very narrow understanding of what women expect from life: partnership with a man, children and a career that can be fitted around family commitments. He ignores Renate’s statement that, like Johanna’s generation, she too feels disadvantaged as a result of her gender: ‘Sie [the previous generation of women] waren benachteiligt im Beruf, wie ich es nicht weniger bin, denn an manchem hat sich trotz der dreißig Jahre, die zwischen uns

liegen, nicht allzu viel geändert.' Renate adds that it still always falls to women to put their careers on hold to care for children.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Neubert sees the stop in Johanna's career development in terms of a more general 'Grenze der Entwicklungsmöglichkeit', which has since been overcome, ignoring the gender dimension of this limitation. Barbara is only discussed in terms of the stages of her transition from a member of the BDM to her role as chief editor of a newspaper and the links between her ambition and the failure of her marriage are glossed over. 'Rita' is, for Neubert, a discussion of the problems of the 'Selbständigwerden der einstigen Kinder' and how the individual can best make use of the 'humane Voraussetzungen unserer Gesellschaftsordnung', and he makes no mention of the issue of Rita's decision to abandon her career in an attempt to avoid the mistakes of her mother's generation.<sup>27</sup>

Annemarie Auer's review of *Partnerinnen* and *Zu meiner Zeit* in *Neues Deutschland* of 12 April 1978 is similarly striking in its failure to mention Brüning's problematisation of female emancipation in the GDR. Auer notes that the work focuses on the 'Lebensfragen heutiger Frauen und Mütter bis in die jüngste Generation', but does not state what these questions might be. Auer notes that one of the protagonists asks 'Was bedeutet Glück?' and answers that it is not only personal achievement, but also love and recognition from those close to you.<sup>28</sup> Auer thus selects an extract, which suggests the compatibility of career and family, compatibility that the individual stories, whilst promoting as the ideal, suggest is impossible to fully achieve while women are still viewed as the primary care-givers. The failure on the part of both of these prominent literary critics, writing in Party-dominated newspapers, to discuss fully the scepticism in the collection regarding the SED approach to female emancipation might indicate an attempt to steer the reading of the

text towards an understanding of the work as purely an affirmation of the need for women to unite career and family. This stands in contrast to the critical questions being raised by other female writers at this time and would seem to indicate that, as argued by Anna Maria Weise, official rhetoric refused any ‘geistige Auseinandersetzung’ with these issues.<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, this reading of the portraits is not reflected in the reception of the work in other publications. In *Die Wochenpost* of 15 September 1978, Annelore Weimer notes that despite the opportunities offered to women under socialism, many still experience difficulties in managing the various spheres of their life and that the portraits show the problems, ‘die dem weiblichen Bürger auch heute noch Hürden und Hindernisse in den Weg stellen’.<sup>30</sup> In *Sonntag* of 8 October 1978, Renate Drenkow insists that Brüning always presents the ‘Frauenfrage’ as ‘Klassenfrage [...] eingebettet in den allgemeinen gesellschaftlichen Fortschritt, historisch konkret motiviert’, thereby following the official interpretation of female emancipation. However, in her discussion of *Partnerinnen* she notes that Brüning leads the reader to question whether success in one’s career leads to losses in one’s family life and if such losses are the result of old perceptions regarding the role of women and mothers.<sup>31</sup> In *Neuer Tag*, the regional SED newspaper in Halle, Helga Glöckner-Neubert states that the constitution of the GDR has guaranteed women all rights to a ‘berufliche und gesellschaftliche Entwicklung’. However, she points towards the conflict inherent in each portrait and describes the text as ‘ein erregendes Buch. Es wiegt uns nicht ein in den Glauben, die Gleichberechtigung der Frau sei voll realisiert’.<sup>32</sup> This varying reception suggests that, although discussion of texts by prominent individuals might be designed to steer the reception of a work, other critics did not necessarily echo this particular reading. The questioning of patriarchal

structures and the problematisation of the 'double burden', seen in the works of critical female writers and discussed in unofficial women's groups at the end of the 1970s, is reflected in muted form in the reception of *Partnerinnen* in these publications.

### **The Views of the Workers**

In contrast to Brüning's claim after the Wende that the work met with official disapproval, the reviews by Neubert and Auer in *Berliner Zeitung* and *Neues Deutschland* are, in fact, overwhelmingly positive in their comments. They do, however, point towards an unwillingness to promote discussion on the topic of female emancipation under socialism. It is important to consider if this attempt to steer the reading of the work was successful. In this context, analysis of the recommendations of the text for the FDGB Kunstpreis can give an indication of the reception of the work amongst a wider readership. The reading of the collection in the literature groups in factories from around the GDR reflects the variety of views in the GDR media. In the vast majority of cases, there is evidence of an effort to reiterate the official Party line on female emancipation, that is, that it has largely been achieved through adequate provision of childcare and other state facilities designed to ease the double burden. For example, in their undated 'Stellungnahme', the Kollektiv der Materialwirtschaft Thomas-Müntzer-Schacht see in Renate a model for all women, as she achieves a combination of being there for her children, satisfaction at work and equality with her partner.<sup>33</sup> In their letter of the 17 April 1979, the Gewerkschaftsbibliothek RAW Magdeburg note the difficulties experienced by the older generation in managing both career and family, but that the state has since created better opportunities for women to develop in their careers.<sup>34</sup> This need not be viewed as a cynical bowing to the official line on female emancipation: following

Irene Dölling, Dinah Dodds notes that men and women often came to believe the Party rhetoric that emancipation had been achieved. Many women did not situate the social measures, such as childcare facilities, which were designed to allow women to combine work and family life, in the context of patriarchal structures and were proud of the state provisions available to them.<sup>35</sup>

However, other groups do point towards the critical concern of the portraits: in her letter of the 2 April 1980, Sabine Neidhardt of the Gewerkschaftsbibliothek of BGW states that Brüning visited the factory in order to discuss *Partnerinnen* with the workers and that the discussion touched upon the question: ‘Sind mit den sozialpolitischen Maßnahmen zur Unterstützung von Mutter und Kind alle Probleme automatisch gelöst?’<sup>36</sup> The Brigade ‘Albert Schweitzer’ of the VEB Fahrzeugausrüstung Berlin, in a letter dated 25 March 1980, found that gender equality was regulated by law, ‘jedoch in der Verwirklichung fehlt vor allem noch das Umdenken bei den Menschen’ and argue that men are not subject to the same conflicts as the women in the portraits.<sup>37</sup>

The combination of these potentially problematic statements in the recommendations for the text and the avoidance of such issues by leading critics might indicate that it was, as Brüning suggests, uncertainty regarding the central concern of the text, the question of female emancipation, which led to the failure to award her the Kunstpreis in 1980. However, the available evidence points not towards a clear ideological line on this issue, but towards a range of views within the public sphere and a fragmentation of opinion. This fragmentation conflicts with both clear-cut official rhetoric on the subject of female emancipation and Brüning’s straightforward interpretation of the reaction to her text after the Wende. This ambiguity is further highlighted by a small number of letters that recommend that

Brüning should not receive the prize. These indicate that such discussions were in some way orchestrated and that *Partnerinnen* had been put forward by the FDGB at least as a potential candidate.

### **Touching on Taboos?**

As indicated above, Brüning's approach to the question of female emancipation under socialism can also be seen as part of a wider movement by GDR women writers in the course of the 1970s. Kaufmann notes that from the 1960s onwards many female writers, such as Irmtraud Morgner, Brigitte Reimann and Christa Wolf, began to regard women's emancipation in the GDR increasingly critically and to argue that economic independence was often felt to be 'only a first step on the long road to emancipation'.<sup>38</sup> Kaufmann tracks the development of writing by women in the GDR: whereas, in the 1950s, there was a predominance of chronological plots, omniscient narrators and the theme of the transformation of apolitical housewives into emancipated women, the late 1960s and 1970s saw the beginnings of 'feminist tendencies' and experiments in form.<sup>39</sup> Amongst the developments in women's writing, Kaufmann notes a turn to more subjective and first-person narrative forms, notably Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968) and Reimann's *Franziska Linkerhand* (1974); the use of fantasy and montage, for example Morgner's *Trobadora Beatriz* (1974) and the employment of open-ended structures, for example Gerti Tetzner's *Karen W.* (1974). This new complexity in form was frequently accompanied by a critique of patriarchal structures and examination of the difficulties associated with gender politics in the GDR.<sup>40</sup>

Brüning's style of writing and her approach to the problems of patriarchal structures in the GDR are closer to realist narrative traditions and the official interpretations of female emancipation than are the works named above. However, the

development in her view of emancipation, from the superwoman of her 1955 novel *Regine Haberkorn* to the more critical *Partnerinnen*, and her use of first-person narrators and free-standing (but interconnected) portraits, rather than traditional prose, can be linked to these shifts in literary discourse. Moreover, the ambivalence and fragmentation of opinion in the reaction of critics towards this text echo the widening of boundaries by critical women writers in the 1970s. This suggests that finding the contours of permissible debate, and, conversely, the areas considered 'taboo', was not simply a matter of knowing Party directives on this or that issue, but rather linked to wider cultural movements, gender politics and the positioning of prominent individuals, including those who were critical of the regime, in relation to official rhetoric. In her comments in 2006 on the reason for the failure to publish *Partnerinnen*, Brüning paints a far simpler picture of the relationship between the official Party line and the boundaries of debate, by suggesting that even her moderate deviation from official discourse on the question of female emancipation met with clear disapproval. This feeds into the broader framework of the retelling of one's past and the attempt by East German writers, against the backdrop of post-Wende politics, to demonstrate distance from the SED regime and present themselves as critics of it.

## **Conclusion**

In the late 1970s, a questioning of the official approach to female emancipation is seen not only in the works of prominent, and critical, female writers, but also, in a muted form, in those of this author who publicly accepted the cultural policies of the Party. Moreover, the ambivalence in the response of cultural authorities, such as Auer and Neubert, demonstrates that, while such issues might not have been discussed explicitly in Party-dominated publications such as *Berliner Zeitung* and *Neues Deutschland*, neither was Brüning's text rejected as ideologically untenable. This is

further emphasised by the willingness of Mitteldeutscher Verlag, whose authors were traditionally subject to particularly stringent controls,<sup>41</sup> to produce the work without significant wrangling over the content, and in the consideration of the text for the FDGB Kunstpreis. This ambivalence not only calls into question any neat division between ‘dissident’ and ‘state-scribe’ in the absence of a consistent and clear-cut Party line on a particular issue, it also indicates the manner in which writers and other intellectuals might contribute to the development, and indeed fragmentation, of cultural discourse under state socialism. As David Bathrick argues: ‘viewed from the perspective of the socialist public sphere, GDR writers were at once the creators of a new audience and a variant of the official voice.’<sup>42</sup> Through ‘stretching or realigning cultural political mappings’,<sup>43</sup> openly critical writers inched back the boundaries of permissible debate and others began to occupy the space negotiated behind them. Writers were thus both subject to the constraints of official interpretations of ideology, through censorship and other mechanisms of control, and played a role in the setting and resetting of these boundaries. Moreover, in ‘broadening [...] the parameters of public speech’ on the women’s question, critical female writers ‘helped forge a break with the officially prevailing Marxist value position on this question’.<sup>44</sup> This break is seen not only in the sphere of critical literature, but is reflected in the broader public space of newspaper reviews, reader response and literary criticism.

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1 Quoted in Joanne Sayner, *Women Without a Past: German Autobiographical Writings and Facism*, Amsterdam 2007, p. 291.

2 Elfriede Brüning, *Vor uns das Leben*, Berlin 1952; *idem*, *Regine Haberkorn*, Berlin 1955; *idem*, *Septemberreise*, Halle 1974.



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3 Brüning, *Und außerdem war es mein Leben*, Berlin 1994, especially pp. 214-5, 234-6, 243-5, 255-7, 281-3.

4 Sayner, *Women Without a Past*, p. 283.

5 See Hans-Jürgen Geerds, 'Bemerkungen zu Elfriede Brünings Erzählung Septemberreise', *Neue Deutsche Literatur*, 2 (1967), 173-82 (178). See also Annemarie Auer, 'Unterhält uns die Unterhaltungsliteratur? Bemerkung zur Bemerkung', *Neue Deutsche Literatur*, 6 (1967), 135-40 and other contributions to the debate in the same volume. The story was not published in book form until 1974. Brüning herself considers that the harsh criticism by Geerds played a role in the delay in publication: see Brüning, "'Im Grunde wollten wir alle dasselbe – eine bessere DDR': Sara Jones im Gespräch mit Elfriede Brüning", *Argonautenschiff*, 16 (2007), 259-72 (261).

6 Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR*, 2nd edn, Berlin 2000, p. 51.

7 Brüning, *Partnerinnen: Erzählungen*, Frankfurt a.M 1982. First published in Halle in 1978.

8 See for example: Dinah Dodds, 'Women in East Germany: Emancipation or Exploitation?', in *Women and the Wende: Social Effects and Cultural Reflections of the German Unification Process*, ed. Elizabeth Boa and Janet Wharton, Amsterdam 1994, pp. 107-14; Chris Weedon, 'Changing Subjectivities? Women and Identity', in *ibid*, pp. 115-23; Anna Maria Weise, *Feminismus im Sozialismus: Weibliche Lebenskonzepte in der Frauenliteratur der DDR, untersucht an ausgewählten Prosawerken*, Frankfurt a.M. 2003, p. 32; Jeanette Madarász, 'Andersdenkende Frauen in der Ära Honecker', in *Views from Abroad: Die DDR aus britischer*

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*Perspektive*, ed. Peter Barker, Marc-Dietrich Ohse and Dennis Tate, Bielefeld 2007, pp. 119-27.

9 Dodds, 'Women in East Germany', pp. 107-8 and 112-3.

10 See Madarász, 'Andersdenkende Frauen', pp. 124-125. Madarász notes that in the late 1970s, it was above all female emancipation and feminism that was of interest to these groups.

11 See for example: Walter Nutz, *Trivialliteratur und Popularkultur. Vom Heftromanleser zum Fernsehzuschauer: eine literatursoziologische Analyse unter Einschluss der Trivialliteratur der DDR*, Opladen 1999, pp. 229-43; Weise, *Feminismus im Sozialismus*, pp. 49-57; Ilse Nagelschmidt, 'Literatur als Lebenshilfe: Elfriede Brüning als Wegbereiter und Wegbegleiter der sozialistischen Frauenliteratur der DDR. Zum Werk der Autorin in der Literatur der fünfziger Jahre', in *Zwischen politischer Vormundschaft und künstlerischer Selbstbestimmung: Protokoll einer wissenschaftlichen Arbeitstagung vom 23. bis 24. Mai 1989 in Berlin*, ed. Irmfried Hiebel, Hartmut Kahn, and Alfred Klein, Eggersdorf 1990, pp. 117-22 (pp. 120-1).

12 See Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR (SAPMO) Bundesarchiv (BArch) DY34/11238 and DY34/11727.

13 Fritz-Hüser-Institut (FHI), Bestand Brüning (BRÜ), 1134.

14 Brüning, *Und außerdem war es mein Leben*, p. 246.

15 Brüning, "'Im Grunde wollten wir alle dasselbe'", 263. Sayner notes that, in her autobiography, Brüning consistently presents herself as 'overtly critical of the system in respect of gender'. Brüning's statement in the 2006 interview is consistent with this. See Sayner, *Women Without a Past*, p. 281.

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16 Eva Kaufmann, 'Women Writers in the GDR, 1945-1989', in *Postwar Women's Writing in German*, ed. and tr. Chris Weedon, Oxford 1997, pp. 169-209 (p. 182).

17 Weise, *Feminismus im Sozialismus*, p. 40. See also Madarász, 'Andersdenkende Frauen', p. 121.

18 Hoffmeister signs the letter as Deputy Head of Department, but I have been unable to ascertain in which Department of the magazine she was working.

19 I would suggest that this is a version of the first portrait in the collection, 'Johanna', which focuses on the problems of a member of the older generation in balancing the demands of the new socialist society with the upbringing of her children.

20 FHI, BRÜ, 668.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Martha Wörsching, 'Für Dich and the Wende: Women's Weekly between Plan and Market', in *Women and the Wende*, ed. Boa and Wharton, pp. 139-154 (p. 142).

23 FHI, BRÜ, 871.

24 FHI, BRÜ, 870.

25 Werner Neubert, 'Im Spannungsfeld von Glück und Leid: Neue Erzählungen von Elfriede Brüning', *Berliner Zeitung*, 8 March 1978.

26 Brüning, *Partnerinnen*, p. 70.

27 Neubert, 'Im Spannungsfeld von Glück und Leid'.

28 Annemarie Auer, 'Lebensnahe Kunst des Einfachen: Zu zwei neuen Büchern von Elfriede Brüning', *Neues Deutschland*, 12 April 1978.

29 Weise, *Feminismus im Sozialismus*, p. 33.

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30 Annelore Weimer, 'Etwas sein oder nicht sein', *Die Wochenpost*, 15 September 1978.

31 Renate Drenkow, 'Partnerinnen', *Sonntag*, 8 October 1978.

32 Helga Glöckner-Neubert, 'Partnerschaft verträgt keine Alternative: Zu einem neuen Buch von Elfriede Brüning', *Neuer Tag*, 28 July 1978.

33 SAPMO BArch DY34/11238.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Dodd, 'Women in East Germany', pp. 108 and 112-3.

36 SAPMO BArch DY34/11727.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Kaufmann, 'Women Writers in the GDR', p. 182.

39 *Ibid.*, pp. 180-181

40 See *Ibid.*, pp. 179-192. See also Weise, *Feminismus im Sozialismus*, especially pp. 30-40; Ines Geipel, 'Autorinnen in der DDR: Aufbruch, Dienstbarkeit und Widerstand. Eine Skizze.', in *Die DDR im Spiegel ihrer Literatur: Beiträge zu einer historischen Betrachtung der DDR-Literatur*, ed. Franz Huberth, Berlin 2005, pp. 117-25. A more personal perspective on the development of the literary treatment of female emancipation in the GDR is offered in, Brita Baume, 'Heldinnen nach Plan: Zur literarischen Sozialisation und zum Umgang mit der Frauenfrage in der DDR', in *'Der weibliche multikulturelle Blick': Ergebnisse eines Symposiums*, ed. Hannelore Scholz and Brita Baume, Berlin 1994, pp. 113-24.

41 Simone Barck, 'Der Mitteldeutsche Verlag in den sechziger Jahren', in *Jedes Buch ein Abenteuer*, ed. *idem*, Martina Langermann, and Siegfried Lokatis, Berlin 1997, pp. 227-42 (p. 230).

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42 David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR*, Lincoln NE, 1995, p. 11.

43 *Ibid*, p. 19.

44 *Ibid*, p. 54.

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